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Particular Policies and Public Education: A Research Opportunity

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Empirical inquiry into the importance of politics for public policies has focused primarily on comparisons of state and metropolitan governmental policies, and the general conclusion has been that political factors have minimal policy impact.¹ The research opportunity suggested here builds upon but goes beyond the approach to public policy analysis pioneered by Dawson and Robinson, Dye, Hofferbert, and Sharkansky.² It focuses upon a single area (education) at a governmental level (local school districts) where politics and policy have traditionally been assumed to be highly interactive and for which data exist that are amenable to more comprehensive (comparative) and sophisticated (longitudinal) analysis.

Specifically, the argument is that local educational systems are arenas for policy analysis which will enable the political scientist to:

- (1) engage in extensive and relevant research without dependency on large-scale or outside funding
- (2) make meaningful substantive and methodological contributions by developing alternative definitions, refined measures, and particularized applications of "politics" and "public policy"
- (3) address questions of the relationship of political or socioeconomic changes to policy changes within a given system over time, among different systems at the same point in time, and among different systems over time.

The policies and politics of local educational systems are of vital concern to citizens, educators, and politicians across the nation. No other single

¹Two excellent reviews of these studies are Herbert Jacob and Michael Lipsky, "Outputs, Structure, and Power: An Assessment of Changes in the Study of State and Local Politics," in Richard I. Hofferbert and Ira Sharkansky, eds., *State and Urban Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 14-40 and also appears in the *Journal of Politics*, XXX (May, 1968), 510-538; and Richard I. Hofferbert, "State and Community Policy Studies: A Review of Comparative Input-Output Analyses" in James A. Robinson, ed., *Political Science Annual*, 1972 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), 3-66.

²Richard E. Dawson and James A. Robinson, "Inter-Party Competition, Economic Variables, and Welfare Policies in the American States," *Journal of Politics*, XXIII (May, 1963), 265-289; Thomas R. Dye, "Governmental Structure, Urban Environment, and Educational Policy," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, XI (August, 1967), 353-380; Richard I. Hofferbert, "The Relationship Between Public Policy and Some Structural and Environmental Variables in the American States," *American Political Science Review*, LX (March, 1966), 73-82; Ira Sharkansky, "Government Expenditures and Public Policies in the American States," *American Political Science Review*, LXI (December, 1967), 1066-1077; and Ira Sharkansky and Richard I. Hofferbert, "Dimensions of State Politics, Economics and Public Policy," *American Political Science Review*, LXIII (September, 1969), 867-880.

domestic policy area directly involves so many citizens and such a large portion of public resources. Education has gone from apathy politics of the 1950's to top priority politics of the 1960's to scarcity politics of the 1970's. And it has become increasingly clear that because the "political and the pedagogical spheres . . . are inextricably intertwined, [only] with an analysis of their interrelationships can one generate policies that fit with the realities of American society."³ There are sound theoretical, substantive and practical reasons for policy oriented political scientists to focus on public education.

No policy area is more amenable than education to inquiry into the significance of local control. The number of educational-related elections in this country has never been documented but certainly exceeds eight thousand per year.⁴ Yet, it is unclear whether this entire electoral process has any impact on the policies of public education. Analyses of how educational policies are made, maintained and/or changed cuts to the heart of much of the traditional American ideology—the value of grassroots democratic procedures, the freedoms and diversity of small communities, the optimistic belief that the people can control their own destinies, that there is a linkage between the people and policy.

Likewise, one of the more sacred residual powers, one of the flagships of federalism in the U.S., is state control over public education. Consequently, a study of the impact of state and local educational policies also addresses fundamental concerns about the utility and viability of federalism in the 1980's. Only comparative policy studies will help us understand the continuing (changing) policy variations (similarities) among and between the multitude of educational jurisdictions as well as the impact of an increased federal role in funding educational programs.

The current substantive issues facing education are the concerns of the nation—racial integration; a literate, skilled, employable citizenry; equality; accountability. As political scientists develop, reexamine, and test hypotheses about the influences, procedures, practices and impacts of different types of local educational policies and policy making, the applied nature of that research becomes more useful and the potential for contributing to a general theory of local public policy making is enhanced. The Rand Corporation Reports on Federal Programs Supporting Educational

³Ray C. Rist, 1976, "Education and Social Policy in the 1970's," *Transaction, Social Science and Modern Society*, 13, (January/February, 1976), 73.

⁴Howard D. Hamilton and Sylvan H. Cohen, *Policy Making by Plebiscite: School Referenda* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1974), 6.

Change⁵ are examples of how the concerns of organizational theorists, policy analysts and educational policy makers can be merged to deal with the processes of social change in contemporary society.

The approaches of political science—political behavior and political processes; policy formulation, implementation and evaluation; rigorous empirical testing of long-held assumptions; application and development of conceptual and theoretical frameworks—are as apropos to the study of local educational policy and policy making as they are to any other legitimate service function of the state. Indeed, the list of distinguished scholars who have explicitly argued for or contributed to research in the politics of education is impressive.⁶ An established information base exists which can provide intelligent guidelines for longitudinal and time-series analyses, and from the case studies and cross-sectional analyses has evolved a substantial set of specific hypotheses as well as basic generalizations about influences on educational policy. The challenge lies in finding new ways to organize and integrate the data and to advance the inquiry through detailed and rigorous analysis.

A Manageable Research Area

Not only is educational policy a substantively and theoretically useful area for intensive political inquiry, it is one that can be relatively accessible and manageable for the single investigator. At a time when large-scale funding is difficult to obtain, education becomes a very attractive research focus for those concerned with empirical inquiry and public policy.

The researcher need not travel extensively to engage in data collection, participant observation, or interviewing. The lone investigator or small research team can readily assemble an adequate data set simply from public records and reports. Intrastate comparative analysis is facilitated by the

⁵Paul Berman and Edward W. Pauly, "Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. 11: Factors Affecting Change Agent Projects," (Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corporation), 1973.

⁶One need only to scan the list of participants and contributors to various workshops, symposia and publications dealing with contemporary educational dilemmas for an indication of the expertise that has been directed toward this field. For example see Thomas H. Eliot, "Toward an Understanding of Public School Politics," *American Political Science Review*, LII, (December, 1959), 1032-51; Michael W. Kirst, *State Schools and Politics: Research Directions*, (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath), 1972; Frederick Mosteller and Daniel P. Moynihan, *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*, (New York: Random House), 1972; Alan Rosenthal, *Governing Education* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Company), 1969; Frederick Wirt (ed.), *The Polity of the School* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company), 1975; Peter J. Cistone (ed.), *Understanding School Boards* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company), 1975; and Harmon L. Zeigler and M. Kent Jennings, *Governing American Schools* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974); Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit.; Philip Piele and John Stuart Hall, *Budgets, Bonds, and Ballots* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company), 1973.

legal requirements and constraints which states impose on school districts in terms of generating revenue, administrative organization, reporting mechanisms, and the like. Because education is a primary responsibility of local communities, there are usually local institutions such as the press, League of Women Voters, state legislative committees and certification and evaluation teams that engage in monitoring and reporting educational activities. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare publishes numerous reports containing data on local school districts, and the National Center for Educational Statistics provides assistance with Census data.⁷ In sum, because schools have been perceived as institutions under local control, there are numerous data available; the resourceful and creative researcher needs simply to purposefully design a study that merges his/her theoretical interests with these available resources.

Alternative Measures of Public Policy and Politics

Aggregate policy studies which investigated the relationship of policy outputs to political, social, and economic variables suggested a viable and rigorous mode of policy analysis. This research alternative has not been fully pursued, in part, because such studies used restricted definitions and indiscriminate measures of both politics and policies. Policy was primarily viewed in terms of expenditures. Politics was equated with party competition, electoral participation, legislative apportionment, and formal executive powers. Local education offers the opportunity to extend this mode of analysis while modifying and hopefully improving upon its utility to the policy analyst and to the policy maker.

Policy. A study of local educational policy can utilize the policy measures of aggregate state analyses and can incorporate the findings of studies directed toward educational systems in order to specify types of policies—expenditures, curriculum, personnel, organizational, social. Given present-day fiscal concerns, it would be informative to look at expenditure levels over time and among districts in relation to the political and socioeconomic inputs of various school systems. But if, as Fry and Winters⁸ suggest, marginal redistributions are more relevant to considerations of incremental change, then the more the expenditures (and revenue sources) can be specified and kept comparable, the greater the likelihood of isolating the

⁷For example, U.S. Office of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics *School District Fourth Count Tape and School District First Count Summary Data* and Department of Health, Education, and Welfare *Directory of Public, Elementary, and Secondary Schools in Selected Districts* (Washington, D.C., 1968, 1970, 1972).

⁸Brian Fry and Richard F. Winters, "The Politics of Redistribution," *American Political Science Review*, LXIV, (June, 1970), 508-522.

conditions and environments under which these specific factors may or may not influence policy change. By specifying "policies" as more than gross expenditure levels, one can also explore the interactive effect of one policy change on another. Expenditures by purpose (administration, instruction, transportation, maintenance, etc.), expenditures by source (local, state, federal) and funds (teachers, incidental, building) are common reporting categories for educational jurisdictions. Such data provide ample opportunity to ask, How is the total pie currently distributed? Over time? What are the marginal redistributive policies in relation to political and socioeconomic conditions?

Furthermore, a focus on local educational policy allows one to go beyond simply discriminating among expenditure levels to consider distinct types of policies—dichotomized as administrative/political or internal/public⁹ or substantive categories such as personnel, curriculum, transportation. Certainly decisions such as scheduling a tax levy, resubmitting a defeated bond referendum, developing minority studies programs or an alternative high school, accepting tuition students or maintaining a resident-only policy, and increasing the curriculum development staff or the testing/measurement staff are, in the general sense, *policy* decisions that can be important to the function of public educational systems. Yet these are representative of the kinds of decisions that have not been included in aggregate policy analyses. By using a broader definition of "public policy" and by differentiating within and among policy decisions, one might fully expect to gain a better understanding of the multitude of influences that are operative and the types of interactions that exist in the making of local educational policy.

As in many other policy areas, great frustration exists over the absence of sound quality and impact measures. Yet this unhappiness and dissatisfaction with past uses of student/teacher ratios, classroom density, per pupil expenditures, or percent attending college should not prevent using these same measures, not as measures of "quality," but as indicators of policy decisions and policy priorities within and among districts. If we have learned anything at all over the past twenty years of empirical political investigation it is that the complete and perfect model does not yet exist. If we can fit some of the pieces together through new approaches to and applications of traditional measures and concerns, perhaps they will give us insights into how the final picture might look.

⁹See Harmon Zeigler, M. Kent Jennings, and G. Wayne Peak, "The Decision-Making Culture of American Public Education" in C. Cotter, ed., *Political Science Annual*, 1974 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1974), pp. 177-226.

Politics. Just as “policy” can be redefined and made more specific, so can the meaning and measure of “politics” be modified to meet the needs and environment of educational policy research. A focus on local education enables the researcher to both replicate and refine the political and socioeconomic measures employed by analysts of state policies. The participatory or electoral measures of the state policy studies (voter registration, voter turnout) can be more comprehensively considered in the local educational setting because of the variety of opportunities for electoral inputs—board elections, bond referenda, tax levies, and budget referenda. “Participation” can be expanded to include the number of ad hoc or citizen advisory committees in the school district, involvement with school-related issues (tax levy drives, forums called by the district or the PTA/PTO’s), attendance and involvement at board meetings, mothers’ clubs, and the like.

Political variables can also be operationalized in terms of the number of candidates competing for school board positions, the winner/loser ratios, tenure of board members and retention/defeat/retirement rates, frequency of elections, resubmissions of tax, budget, or bond referendum, and decision rules (two-thirds, simple majority, or plurality). Depending on the analyses, political factors may be employed as dependent, independent, or intervening variables. How important these factors are in determining policy (e.g., intervening or causal variables) can be examined where changes have occurred within districts over time and in a comparative analysis when there is variation on these dimensions. The impact of socioeconomic changes on the political characteristics of the district (e.g., dependent variable) and the correlates of socioeconomic conditions with specific political features and specific policies provides a second target for analysis.

Piele and Hall’s *Budgets, Bonds and Ballots* and Hamilton and Cohen’s *Policy Making by Plebiscite*¹⁰ offer excellent summaries of recent research on school-related elections and a long list of correlates of electoral success/failure. What remains to be done is to take the giant step—to consider how electoral success or failure relates to changes in educational policy. Additional and more specified political and socioeconomic measures will permit more breadth and depth in our attempts to explain the relationship between inputs and policy outputs. We can ask, Does electoral success/failure cause policy changes? What kinds? Are the changes similar within different types of districts? Or are they different within similar types of districts? How do competitive board elections relate to policy?

¹⁰Philip Piele and John Stuart Hall, *op. cit.*; Hamilton and Cohen, *op. cit.*

Socioeconomic measures such as per capita income, urbanization, and industrialization which have been utilized in the state policy studies can also be applied to the study of local school districts. In addition, one can compute socio-demographic changes for local districts by a comparative analysis of census data and supplement it with local school enumerations, attendance records, citizen surveys, and research reports by state and federal agencies. Economic measures such as assessed valuation of real estate, local industries, utilities; local tax efforts; and sources of revenue (local, state and federal) are generally part of school districts' annual reports and thus are readily available for use by the policy analyst.

Longitudinal Analysis

If we are to understand change in public policy then we cannot remain content with cross-sectional or single case study research designs. Comparative, longitudinal analyses have obvious constraints and cannot provide a complete theory of local educational policy-making. Combined with the techniques and data already employed, however, longitudinal analysis can answer some important questions and stimulate further creativity and research.¹¹

Longitudinal analyses will enable us to examine aspects of the educational policy process that have changed and those that have had continuity and to analyze the conditions under which change/continuity takes place. For example, as school districts change in terms of demographic characteristics of the population, which policies change the most? the least? When districts change in the same direction (more/less affluent) are the areas of policy change the same? When the racial composition of a district changed in 1960, what, if any, were the accompanying policy changes? in 1970? Is there a critical mass or a triggering point at which administrative/staff imbalance occurs? Does the concept of "competitive election" have the same implications today as it did when schools had greater flexibility and access to increasing resources? As school enrollments increased, what were the corresponding political and policy changes? As enrollments decrease, do the same policy areas change?

With a data set that extends over time, one can also begin to develop some understanding for the time lag that exists between changes in inputs and policy outcomes. Budgets require lead time and planning; hence a large turnover of board members may not manifest itself in budgetary matters for

¹¹One of the few longitudinal studies concerned with the impact of school electoral politics in Laurence Iannaccone's *Politics in Education* (New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education, Inc.), 1967.

12 to 18 months after a critical election. On the other hand, superintendent changes may produce radical policy changes within six months—whether or not such leadership change was predicated on voter or community expressions of dissatisfaction.

We all suspect that education is undergoing tremendous change and that the changes (be they decreased enrollments, taxpayer revolts, dependence on federal financing or increased local control) affect the policies and consequently the output of the school system. Only with longitudinal, comparative data can we provide empirical evidence to support or to contradict our suspicions. Optimistically, analysis of past trends and changes will help us to understand and to predict the changes (real and potential) of the future.

Application of the Strategy

The traditional questions of political scientists, “Does politics make a difference?” and “If not politics, what?” are legitimate ones to direct to local educational systems. The research strategy that has been suggested here can help answer these questions by adapting the traditional concerns and approaches of political science to the substantive field of education policy and politics. For example, research can focus on (a) the impact of *voting behavior* (i.e., Does a change in electoral behavior affect educational policy changes? What kinds? Are all school districts affected similarly by comparable electoral phenomena?); (b) the *responsiveness* of policy makers (do policies of school districts adjust or change when the clientele of the district changes? What sources of “demand” are most likely to generate response? Under what conditions is response more/less likely to occur?); (c) the *change-producing* aspects of the sociopolitical environment (Does increased competition for elected offices, increase in revenue base, decrease in white enrollments, and rapid turnover of board members lead to greater/fewer policy changes? To policy changes of certain types (e.g., budget), but not others (e.g., school curriculum)?

What we are suggesting is a strategy that provides a means by which specific research findings about school-related elections [“the larger the turnout, the smaller the percentage of favorable votes cast in a school financial election”¹²] and specific findings from policy analyses [“... on the whole, urban environmental variables were more influential in determining educational policy outcomes than structural characteristics of political

¹²Piele and Hall, *op. cit.*, 63-69.

systems"¹³] can be simultaneously reconsidered. Increased turnout may not be a good predictor of electoral success and school board representation may not be related to per pupil expenditures, but changes in turnout and school board representation may be related to budgetary reallocations or to administrative policy decisions. Over time, these relationships may have become stronger or weaker. The fact that most school-related elections are nonpartisan may be a significant influence on the interaction between electoral behavior and policy outcomes.¹⁴

The flexibility and the potential of the suggested strategy is illustrated by the scope and breadth it allows when one addresses the relationship of electoral phenomena and educational policy; and, the hypotheses that can be generated from existing research findings and theorizing are numerous:

As voter turnout increases, there will be more change in political (public) policies and fewer changes in administrative (internal) policies.

As negative votes for tax-bond-budget referenda increase, there will be fewer political policy changes but an increase in administrative policy changes.

As sources and/or amounts of revenue change within a district, voter turnout will vary.

As greater reliance is placed on local tax effort, voter turnout will increase.

As reliance on local tax effort increases, curriculum innovation decreases.

In times of increased revenue (from non-local sources), voter turnout decreases.

To test these kinds of hypotheses, turnout can be viewed as participation in any or all types of school elections (bond, tax, board, etc.) and policy can be viewed as broadly as total expenditures per pupil, as generally as categories of decisions such as "administrative" or "public," or as specifically as implementing an ESEA Title VIII or a pre-school program. Turnout and policy can be analyzed as dependent, intervening or independent variables and comparisons of relationships within and among districts at a single point in time and over time are possible.

Implicit in many of the arguments being made about the inability of school districts to cope with present circumstances is an economic argument—that tax bases must be expanded and that other sources of revenue must be found. Certainly, existing research has documented the im-

¹³Dye, *op. cit.*, 379.

¹⁴Willis D Hawley, *Nonpartisan Elections and the Case for Party Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

portance of economics for education¹⁵. But we have little evidence to suggest how changes in revenue (generation or allocation) have, in the past, altered the specific policies of public education. Therefore, we cannot be confident that by changing economic inputs we can insure the kinds of policy changes desired.

The longitudinal nature of the data will permit an examination of how changes have occurred in the past (economic and sociodemographic) and how policies have related to such changes. One can determine through time-series analyses the lag-time between input changes and policy changes. With a comparative data set, one can see how a common change (the state changing the decision rule from simply majority to two-thirds majority for ratification of tax increase) affects districts of various stages of economic development, size, socioeconomic constituencies, etc. We assume that a common remedy will not cure all the ills; yet we do not know how past remedies have affected the (relative poor/good) health of various districts.

What has been suggested here is a research strategy for data utilization that can combine realistic research opportunities with real-world policy concerns: it is timely, meaningful and manageable. The utility of elections as linkages between people and policies, the significance of demographic and economic changes for public policies, the impact of federalism on specific local policies as well as the impact of federal intervention on this particular aspect of federalism, the types of adaption to change evidenced by public decision-making institutions are all of long standing interest to democratic theorists, practical politicians and public policy analysts. By taking advantage of the data sources provided by public records of local school systems through the years, by using the proximity of the researcher to local educational institutions (for interviewing, observing, and monitoring), by building upon the extensive base provided by multi-disciplinary and cross-sectional studies, and by more specificity in defining and operationalizing "politics" and "policy" within the context of local school environments, the public policy analysts can begin to address some of the traditional questions of political science as well as provide a more comprehensive picture of the practical interaction between political and socioeconomic contextual factors and public policies.

¹⁵Elchanan Cohn, *The Economics of Education* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972); Jesse Burkhead, *Input and Output in Large-City High Schools* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1967); Martin T. Katzman, *The Political Economy of Urban Schools* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Financing Schools and Property Tax Relief—A State Responsibility* (Washington, D.C., 1972).